Casanova and the Revolution

Chantal Thomas

Giacomo Casanova (1725-98), Venetian gambler and libertine, still fascinates us. Not for the number of conquests (122 women in thirty-nine years, apparently – the exploit obviously tied to a certain delight in mathematical verification), nor for the highly accomplished strategies of seduction; but more insidiously and according to the "reciprocal deception" that was at the heart of all his amorous adventures, for the strength of his imagination – strength and weakness, weakness converted to strength by his obstinate determination to stand by the power of appearances. And if sometimes these speak an obscure language, one must try neither to ascertain nor seek to elucidate them.

It is thus that Casanova can write about a family of orphans he welcomed into his home. Poverty-stricken and all equally lovely (equality being a function of the moment since the loveliest is always the most recently loved, the last woman denuded), he writes: "*Je les adorais m'adorant*" ("I adored them adoring me"). Here the narcissistic confusion of the lover is well served by the ambiguities of French grammar. Who adores whom? From Casanova's point of view, the question is irrelevant. What counts is that adoration is taking place, that the reader be swept away with Casanova on a crest of rapture without specific origin or final truth, surrendering to the amorality of a writing which represents with equal intensity the whiteness of a forearm, the velvet of a suit, the taste of an oyster. Moreover, the reader must accept the challenge to be put in Casanova's place (an ontologically absurd challenge since Casanova relies on a series of masks).

This is what reading Casanova's memoirs requires.[1] It is a reading he wished to provoke, it is what prompted him to write and sustained him as he aged; it is what, by way of the letter, incites the reader to dream a figure, to vivify an image. In keeping with the self-love which animates his oeuvre, the imaging of Casanova has had undeniable success. Comic strips and films have sought to visualize the personage. In the cinema, we know

Donald Sutherland in Fellini's *Casanova*, 1976.

Comencini's juvenile *Casanova* (1969), Fellini's mostly senile, nordic *Casanova* (1976) and Mastroianni's heavily adorned interpretation in Ettore Scola's *La Nuit de Varennes* (1982). Also worth mentioning is the more liberal and indirect adaptation of Luis Buñuel's *That Obscure Object of Desire* (1977) which recounts the adventure of Casanova and La Charpillon – that sad episode that inspired Pierre Louys's novel *Woman and Puppet* which Josef Von Sternberg would adapt and direct as *The Devil is a Woman* (1935) (curious, this insistence on the single truly disastrous misadventure in Casanova's life). The film takes place in Seville and the femme fatale is played by Marlene Dietrich. It opens (as does Fellini's film) with a carnival scene – one of the most beautiful ever filmed – with a volley of masks, serpentine mouldings and wrought-iron grills. One can imagine that the fictions and distortions, the departures from his text would not have displeased Casanova (especially with a leading lady like Dietrich); and further, that the cinema would have seemed to him an apt medium. Pure hypothesis, of course. But it is certain that being an image in movement was one of his great joys, and that if Casanova loved to be looked at, he would have detested being fixated.

In his memoirs, he rarely appears in a state of utter confusion except when he is the object of a close scrutiny which has little to do with amorous intrigue. Thus, in Naples, he becomes totally helpless under the gaze of a rich and beautiful woman who silently and unsympathetically inspects him. "In life," he writes "there are situations to which I have never adapted. If, in the most wonderful company, someone eyes me, I am unhinged; I become bad-tempered and stupid."[2] The look which touches him must be furtive and desirous, it must not imprison him in a hostile exteriority. Casanova likes to be seen in the light of seduction, he does not want to be recognized. His role as a seducer involves a great visibility, but his "function" as a charlatan, a swindler, and a secret agent requires the constant availability of a shadow to step into, and if need be, to disappear through. His impetuous coquetry is tempered by the adage *pas vu, pas pris* (not seen, not caught). In the looks he elicits, he asks no more than a light, furtive complicity, an agreement between impostors.

Hence, perhaps, an interest in a "feminine" reading of Casanova which, without denigrating the importance of a critical scrutiny that up until now has been exclusively male, would adhere less to the Casanova myth, along with what such an adherence implies regarding notions of sexual identity and authenticity. Among others, I think of Maurice Heine's statement: "I would not recommend this book to a woman, but I would to all my male friends...." Or that declaration of Gérald Bauër: "Nonetheless, the flavour (of Casanova's *récits*) can only be fully appreciated by men (*lecteurs*), not by women (*lectrices*).

▶ Marlene Dietrich in *The Devil is a Woman*, 1935.

The *Mémoires* is a man's book...." Or even the avowal by Stefan Zweig: "No man, who is really a man, can read Casanova's *Mémoires* without, at some time, feeling envy." Perhaps more explicit were the words of Octave Uzanne which open the critical, historical and illustrated texts of Casanova's *Mémoires*, published volume by volume (1924 to 1934) by *Editions de La Sirène*, each new instalment feverishly awaited by Casanovists:

> Bookstores tell us that numerous discussions with women, however free-spirited, incontestably prove that Casanova, at this point in time, has no bevy of female admirers to pay tribute to his autobiography.... Regardless of the social group to which women belong: young working-class or old dowager, petite bourgeoise or art professional, ingenue or courtesan, when they read this Venetian Don Juan, they all claim that he is annoying, soporific and a bore.... Reading the *Mémoires* by masculine standards of evaluation, gives a completely different point of view, a true appreciation for the dynamogenic force which allowed such a man to live a vagabond and passionate life. We admire him and with just cause.

Women are lacking then, in the first principle of evaluation upon which rests the "dynamogenics" of the masculine assessment – including those, obviously neurotic men, who say they don't like Casanova. Hence, regardless of whether this myth gives rise to envy or horror (as was the case with Fellini who, in his extreme disgust for the character, ripped out the pages of the *Mémoires* as he read them; later on, during the shooting of the film, he went so far as to have Donald Sutherland's teeth filed down), the end result is the same. That is: the recognition of the obvious effect, that of a limpid desire and a physiological performance without uncertainty in accord with the strong belief in a sort of predestination – being born to love women and be loved by them. One can question the meaning of a certain predilection which, when translated into literary terms, results in an exclusion: Casanova, who lived for women, is unreadable to them.

In reality, we are not speaking about reading here but about the radiant (or odious) auto-contemplation of one's phallic force. These overheated visions take place in the shadows of a gigantic funhouse: sword emblazoned, genitals tattooed, false-nose of the carnival.... This is fine. Casanova, no doubt, wrote no other way – while hallucinating long- vanished virtualities. As for myself, I would not be deprived of such figurative complaisances. (Even though I write, simply for purposes of discretion, beneath a white parasol. Further away is the sea, a pole without attraction in the eighteenth century universe. The beach is visible from the terrace where I sit. Armed with telephoto lenses, men photograph naked breasts. They will develop the images later, in the secret of a dark chamber, comparing them, inventing faces and biographies that will be made to cross theirs.) It pleases me also to believe, not to reassure myself of my

abilities, but to find pleasure in a series of dazzling sequences, completely satisfying in and of themselves, without spiritual burdens or the need for communication. In Casanova, everyone follows their own trajectory, and this trajectory is identical with the pursuit of their own proper pleasure. It is on this singular platform, this blind spot, this disharmonious foundation that encounters take place. There is no question, then, of wanting to destroy the Casanova myth: it is completely pleasing. Moreover, as Casanova once responded to Voltaire who wanted to attack the penchant for superstition, with what shall we replace it?

But I would underline that Casanova alone is the author, in both senses of the term, of this myth; that the figure of Casanova, as it is visually reproduced or invented or implied in self-reference, is the result, uniquely, of a writing practice. This is *all* that we know of Casanova. Casanova the writer has been effaced, the projectors having been centred on Casanova the lover. We do not want to see that the latter can exist only through the former, that he is truly the first *metteur en scène* of his sexuality. Generally, the scene of Casanova as an old man writing his memoirs is considered to be the last episode of his life, the tamest chapter in an action-packed existence (and perhaps not the most successful: one only reads Casanova corrected). Writing was to come after everything he lived.... This confounds the problem for the sake of realist convention, and because it is easier to think of sex as a crude fact upon which, subsequently, language came to be grafted rather than to think of the discordant, aberrant, ridiculous, but profoundly blissful simultaneity of a being both of language *and* sexuality.

The alleged naturalness of the "tender and joyful lover" (as praised by Apollinaire in one of his last works)[3] leads us to forget the fundamental part played by duplicity, by the semantic and literary mechanisms which constituted the very existence of Casanova. These invisible mechanisms make Casanova's memoirs such a multifaceted text, astounding in the rapidity of perspectival shifts, the narrator's mobility, his unlimited curiosity, his taste for the dirty and the sordid and even the monstrous, his love of disguise.

To be caught neither by envy nor repulsion, or worse with a view to vindication, I will afford myself the liberty of disorientation – the liberty to get lost, to stop, to continue and mostly to be surprised. In favour of this *non-savoir*, I want to be sensitive to the singularity of Casanova's libertine discourse – and to the body, that was at once its support, centre and object of obsession. To what in him is indivisible in the name of an experience that is supposedly communal. The baroque beauty, lowly, coarse, rough, often violent, and profoundly foreign – across the double distance of a temporal separation and, more intimate and problematic, the breach between Casanova and the French language – that

marks the *Mémoires*, has nothing to do with a smooth and reassuring tableau. It opens onto interrogations, gestures of romanesque force and the isolation of enigmas.

Casanova situates himself on the side of the gambler and of superstition, with the alliance of ruse and know-how, in a rapport of total and systematic dispossession (but not the dispossession of being deliriously in love, rather, that of the chance moment), and therefore in a position of resolute ignorance. This Casanovian "ignorance" assures the presence of two elements essential to the pleasure principle: do not try to know when knowing could result in the reduction of pleasure, refuse any and all aspects of culpability. Casanova knows how to satisfy himself with illusions. Moreover, regardless of the pressure of people or events, he does not assume even the slightest responsibility for any wrong doing. As he so charmingly writes: "In the end I was never bad, and when I was, only light-heartedly."[4] This non-acceptance of wrong doing, identical to accepting its necessity, is evidence of a fatalistic attitude.

The temporality of the *Mémoires* is closed to all significance, to the enterprising intelligence (or recuperation) of historical progress as to personal wisdom: aging brings nothing but the sadness of growing ugly. Perhaps this is the root of his overwhelming passion for young girls: not to sully their innocence so much as to join with their naïveté. To magically remain within this immemorable and impure universe, one prior to time, but also prior to the presence of the Other and the threat of their desire or refusal.

With heavenly frivolity, Casanova ignores the weighty complications of amorous liaisons, to which the English term "affair" gives a fairly accurate description. He is absolutely a man of leisure (this is why, contrary to Mozart's librettist Lorenzo da Ponte, he never had the idea to go into exile in the United States). His speed – once a place appeared devoid of pleasure he would not linger – does not respond to some external urgency. It follows a personal and solitary rhythm. It is this off-handed and happily non-relational notion of others which first attracted me, like the image of an airy and always populated space. In effect, the horizon of Casanova's voyages are consistently human. He does not go anywhere if not to see people, preferably famous people. (In the following century, monuments replace living people: one gallops to the Pyramids as one once did to Voltaire.) Despite the musky odours, the atmosphere of this worldly space is eminently breathable, perhaps because Casanova is emotionally detached. This does not mean he is cold or morose. But he is vibrant with a sentiment which in our day rarely passes for passion: curiosity.

Seeing a woman for the first time, Casanova's musings do not follow a dual logic. He is simply curious – about her nudity, about what it would be like to make love to her,

about particular sensations attached to details as yet unknown. People in the *Mémoires* stay together for the duration of a curiosity. This universe, at once discontinuous and tending toward the next encounter, moving from one European capital to the next in a single stride (however slow), constitutes a perfect space for circulation. Each page creates the desire to engage. For what else entices us to imagine a century (this temporal cutout being nothing more than an abstraction, a mental caprice) so far away, as improbable as the eighteenth century, if not the presence of desire or a network of desires?

At present, mine concern the following points: love experienced without depth, without fantasies of perpetuation, but with the certainty of a practice, and a body to sate with all the attention that its newness demands; the world travelled according to a map of its festivities; life loved as voyage.

In that case, you may ask, why this bookish detour (why stay on the terrace under a white parasol)? There are more immediate ways, more directly Casanovian, which do not involve visits to the library or premature seclusion. Certainly. I have said this to myself more than once. What a fundamental lack of comprehension! I am disturbed, that is certain. But compared to what? Perhaps as compared to handbooks on literature (such troubles are dangerous as they only occur during the pregenital phase when everything is confused with everything else). I imagine Casanova himself, incredulous, gleeful before such an imbecilic spectacle, such puritanical studiousness: me compiling files, or copying passages from his old letters, letters which he wrote while half asleep, remembered only upon receiving the reply. And I wonder what scenes he would have invented to brighten me up, to make me abandon paper and pen and enter the carnival. Which caresses he would have tried. Assuredly the most convenient. He may have had a taste for the circus and acrobatic exploits, but only if the situation warranted. As at the lazaret of Ancone with the young Greek slave-girl, he "frequents" but only half her body (the upper half).

What would he have done with a woman rivetted to her typewriter? A novel situation for him. Everyone he encounters is marvellously unemployed, at best they work furiously to obtain an opus; as dinner is served, they will go check that the oven has been turned off. Apart from that, they have unlimited availability. Although there are many performances at the opera which could count as scheduled appointments, no one feels obliged to show up on time. Hence, no restrictive schedules. And, obviously, no time spent on typing. However, the typewriter certainly would not have left Casanova indifferent (of all the new words engendered by the beginnings of modernity, the only one he likes and, as we shall see, the one he uses to finish his critical examination of the *Dictionnaire de la*

Révolution, is *télégraphe*). To reassure himself of his strangeness, he would start by trussing me. I have always wanted to write while someone, not too feverishly – I would not want to completely lose the train of my thoughts – but sufficiently involved, caressed me.... After a lengthy pause over a semi-colon, I would open my legs....

And it is thus that I have not renounced this critical undertaking.

The Phantom Liberty

Nothing in Casanova's *récit* warns of the impending revolution. He maintains the apoliticism commonly held prior to the event. As Robert Darnton has remarked:

> True, censorship prevented serious discussion of politics in publications like the *Journal de Paris*, France's only daily paper.... But the hottest topics of all, the subjects that provoked debates and aroused passions, the items with "news value" in the eyes of the contemporary journalists, were mesmerism, balloon flights, and the other marvels of popular science. The *bulletins à la main*, which generally circulated independently of the censors and the police, paid relatively little attention to politics, except for great scandals like the Affair of the Diamond Necklace and spectacular events like *lits de justice*.[5]

The French Revolution – a date that will be seen as an inaugural historical moment, one which defines the times and makes necessary a reinterpretation of all that preceded it – was experienced by Casanova as somewhat accidental and most certainly reversible. It was a crisis, not a beginning. It sprang forth like some disaster from nowhere but, alas, was dangerously confined to Paris. That it occurred in France, the chosen site for Casanova and the theatre of his libertinage, further exacerbated its scandalous character. It was as if the horizon of his own life had suddenly been blotted out. Indeed, all those things which gave him endless pleasure were seen as an impediment to the public Good: the games of appearance and imposture, the thrill of the theatre, the fever of inequity, the immorality of predation or chance – with their overwhelming indifference to notions of equality, fraternity and even liberty

It isn't difficult to imagine how the Revolution's vision of women and the ideals of republican virtue ascribed to them, could have displeased or seemed incomprehensible to Casanova. Nor is it difficult to imagine his astonishment upon reading, for example, these lines in a *Salut Public* pamphlet (September 1793):

> Women! do you wish to be republicans? Love, follow and teach those laws which call upon your husbands and children to exercise their rights; glory in those dazzling actions which favour *La Patrie* as this bears witness in your favour; be simple in your mien, tireless in your

duties; never attend rallies with the desire to speak but let your presence encourage your children; then *La Patrie* will bless you for you will have fulfilled her righteous expectations.

Such exhortations to modesty, self-effacement, and altruism gave him pause to wonder. Not simply because he had always loved watching and listening to women and that their absence from a public space entailed, for him, the immediate disaffectation from that space, but mostly because the sacrificial system which supported this ideal was inconceivable to him.

There lies within revolutionary passion an element of abstraction, of detachment from the self and one's own life which is completely alien to him. Casanova aligns himself with great men on the condition that they be living. Illustrious memorials notwithstanding, all dialogue stops with the dead.

Woman, cast solely as wife and mother, was supposed to devote herself to husband and children who themselves existed solely to lay down their lives. All look toward Death. Widows, having finally realized the essence of their femininity gather silently around gravestones (or as per Saint-Just's cherished image: friends strolling together through the cemeteries). Within such a universe, even physiology differs: now when confronted by an excessively pale woman, Casanova dare not, with the same certainty as before, attribute it to excessive masturbation. Patriotic zeal made it more probably due to excessive maternity. Thus this "superhuman maternity" which, according to Michelet, gave strength and beauty to the women of the Revolution, evokes no sympathy in Casanova. But unlike Sade, he harbours no violently anti-maternal discourse diametrically opposed to the ideology of the Roman matron. Rather, Casanova does not like the scent of the nursery (as was the case with black knickers, this was one of the few things which turned him off). However, this distaste does not commit him to any particular theory. While he has occasion to encounter women with children (his or other men's), it does not lead him to draw conclusions, either pejorative or reverential. He does not think anything. He is always willing to assist a woman who wishes to abort, otherwise he lets be. While this indifference may appear to be a limitation; I find it to be a soothing characteristic. He does not presume to have any jurisdiction over, nor does he impose any ideology on his partner. Casanova does not pretend to know women in the sense that he would think anything about them or their place. He only tries to recount a certain number of pleasurable episodes in which they figure.

The revolutionary spirit and Casanova's mode of being are radically opposed. There can exist between one and the other only a mutually exclusive rapport. And insofar as the Revolution rejects the Ancien Régime in its entirety, so does Casanova defend it without restriction. He, who several times was its victim (but who each time managed to escape

incarceration), goes so far as to affirm it: "happy time of *lettres de cachet*, you are no more..."[6] From Casanova's point of view, very conscious of the systematic nature of the revolutionary enterprise, change cannot be partial. His totalitarianism responds to that of his enemies. For him also "all crimes will stand." And he will never cease to seek revenge on all for all time. The desire for circularity which underpins the writing of the memoirs – the notion that all that has occurred since the birth of the author, and even before, will begin again with a timelessness that knows neither progress nor destruction – is extended to society as a whole. Casanova loves the Europe in which he has lived, and it is this which he endeavours to preserve. For him, the Revolution is *hors texte*. The refrain of eternal return in his writing (his recounting of events always carries the implicit hope that they be repeated again and forever: he is wearing the same sequined velvet suit, the woman smiles at him as before), this acceptance, this desire for the return of the same, explains in part the absence of death in his stories. This is absolutely opposed to the hypothesis of nightmare upon which opens Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

> If the French Revolution were to recur eternally, French historians would be less proud of Robespierre. But because they deal with something that will not return, the bloody years of the Revolution have turned into mere words, theories, and discussions, have become lighter than feathers, frightening no one. There is an infinite difference between a Robespierre who occurs only once in history and a Robespierre who eternally returns, chopping off French heads.[7]

Casanova condemns the revolutionary movement by according it only a minimum presence in his narrative. In the Casanovian text the Revolution, like old age, appears in parentheses, and as anathema. Never described (because that would lend it too much weight), it is referred to only in the tone of endless deploration: "Fatal and infamous revolution," Casanova moans at various intervals, not according to the logic of his text, but according to his particular mood. He writes from a reserve of anger and grief, an inexhaustible reserve which hinders, more or less, the direction of his *récit*: his was a melancholic temperament in the end.

That the Revolution originates in Paris only contributes to its unacceptable character. Still, for Casanova this is not incongruous with the French mentality: "This nation is made to be in a constant state of violence."[8] He had chosen France for the pursuit of his libertinage: formally, he recognized the same rigour in the revolutionary phase. He is amazed by France's extremism. It is not without fascination that he underlines the versatility, political or affective, of the French people:

> Oh happy and sublime nation, above all prejudice and for whom there exists no insult that

would have the power to horrify. She laughs while digging up the dead, she eats human flesh and finds it exquisite, and she gives the nickname *raccourci* [shortened] to Good King Louis XVI as she gave *bien-aimé* [beloved] to his predecessor.[9]

For Casanova, there is one event that seems to significantly reflect the different sentiments the French espoused for their kings – it is Damiens's attempt on the life of King Louis XV (5 January, 1757). Casanova, who had gone to Versailles to present himself to the Cardinal de Bernis, is there at the moment of the attempt. He is immediately arrested as a suspect along with twenty or so others: "We were there and we looked at each other without daring to utter a word; shock overwhelmed us and although innocent we were afraid."[10] Before worrying about the fate of the Louis XV, he trembles first for himself. It is typical of all Casanova's stories to describe an historic event in terms of its effect on him. He has no doubt about who the principle actor on the stage might be. Indeed, there is, in Casanova, an egocentricity so full of certitude that it renders unintelligible any revolutionary discourse on disinterestedness. On a larger scale, this explains the lack of objective proportion in the world he traverses. This world is variable and transposed only with difficulty, it is as if the living and moving scale upon which it is founded allowed no adjustment and was, quite literally, without common measure.

Because he understands the tenuous link between crime and punishment, Casanova's first reaction to Damiens's attempt on the king's life is fear of being put under lock and key. It is after he is freed that he experiences the titillating pleasure of being one of the first to know about what had just happened at Versailles. On the whole then, a rather happy and memorable event. One quite different from his description of Damiens's execution. To please some ladies, Casanova rents a window which looks onto the *Place de Grève* (where stands, that had been especially built, collapse under the weight of the crowds during the execution). "We had the fortitude," writes Casanova, "to remain for four whole hours at that horrible spectacle...." He spares the reader further details having been himself unable to bear the sight: "At Damiens's execution, I had to avert my eyes, hearing his shrieks, having only half of his body; but La Lambertini and Mme XXX did not avert theirs...." Their insensitivity is nothing compared to some women spectators who had the good heart to be concerned for the horses.

At Casanova's window another spectacle is played out – or at least this is the one he wishes to emphasize. So as not to see Damiens being drawn and quartered, he watches his friend Tiretta kissing La Lambertini: "Being very close behind her, he had tucked up her dress so as not to step on it which was as it should be. But upon closer scrutinization, I noticed he had tucked it up a bit too much. I heard the rustling of skirts for two whole

hours."[11] Casanova "substitutes, in this way, a hideous event with a tableau more fitting to the story of his life."[12] Substitution, tableau-screen (all the more functional since La Lambertini is not a slender woman). We may ask ourselves if this effort, more than eliding the visual, may also have served to conceal the cries. All accounts of the event make note of Damiens's horrible screaming, which lasted *for more than two hours* and attested to an "agony beyond description." More than two hours, that is exactly the amount of time that Casanova found himself singularly absorbed in the noise of rustling skirts.

This scene which Casanova finds "pleasant," is not in keeping with an execution – even if Tiretta seems to take advantage of La Lambertini's frame. She is in the realm of the grotesque. We find in Sade numerous references to sexual scenes unfolding upon the spectacle of torture. The screams of the tormented are the conductors of pleasure. This is not the case with the scene described by Casanova. It must seem fortuitous (as was fortuitous the "unnatural" way Tiretta had taken this woman. This is why she sulks the next day and complains to Casanova). Her suffering and Damiens's are linked only by virtue of their simultaneity. The execution could be suppressed, should be. In the game of eternal return, Casanova once again succeeds in saving his *entire* universe: instead of looking out the window, he shifts his position very slightly to watch what happens at the window.

While Casanova's brief arrest following the failed attempt on the life of Louis XV is without legal consequences, it plays not an insignificant role in his attitude regarding the Damiens affair. Contrary to public opinion which reviles Damiens, Casanova, who knows that he could have just as easily been taken for the guilty party, feels no enthusiasm for the expiatory rite of a spectacular purification. The issue of protecting and healing the social body does not interest him. He never seeks his well-being through collective ideals. On the contrary, his principle worry is that he be excluded *by mistake* from manoeuvres about which he is ignorant. Hence, his revulsion at attending Damiens's execution joins his repugnance for the guillotine. What strikes him the most about it is the disparity of the retribution: Damiens is put on the rack, burned, then drawn and quartered although he had barely wounded the king. "He had scarcely pierced his skin, but this didn't matter. . . ."[13]

The public condemnation expressed during the Damiens affair, necessary to purge

Lamort -

Paris

ont voté

12 130 Robespierre — La mort.
131 Danton — La mort.
132 Collot-d'Herbois — La mort
Manuel — La détention dans un fort ailleurs qu'à Paris, jusqu'à ce que l'intérêt public permette la déportation.

133 Billaud-Varennes — La mort dans 24 heures.
134 Camille Desmoulins — La mort.
135 Marat — La mort dans 24 heures.
136 Lavicomterie — La mort.
137 Legendre — La mort.
138 Raffron — La mort dans 24 heures.
139 Panis — La mort.
140 Sergent — La mort.
141 Robert — La mort.
Dusaulx — Le bannissement à la paix.
142 Fréron — La mort dans 24 heures.
143 Beauvais — La mort.
144 Fabre d'Églantine — La mort.
145 Osselin — La mort.
146 Robespierre, jeune — La mort.
147 David — La mort.
148 Boucher — La mort.
149 Laignelot — La mort.
Thomas — La détention jusqu'à la paix, et la mort dans le cas d'envahissement du territoire français par les puissances étrangères.

Appel nominal des 16 & 17 janvier 1793. B. 17.

150 L. J. Égalité — La mort.

Pas-de-Calais.

151 Carnot — la mort
152 Duquesnoy — La mort.
153 Lebas — La mort.
Thomas Payne — La détention: le bannissement à la paix.
Personne — La détention: le bannissement à la paix.
154 Guffroy — La mort dans le délai de la loi.
Eulart — La déportation dans une de nos îles pour y être détenu, et le bannissement de toutes les terres de la République à la paix.
155 Bollet — La mort.

The French Revolution's death list.

the stain of regicide, is as alien to him as are the revolutionary voices which cry out for executions to bring forth a regenerated France. His is the attitude of a stranger travelling through a foreign land, observing but not participating (except as a disgusted spectator) in murders which found or preserve a collectivity. But his attitude also reflects an intellectual position which is unsure of its place between vice and virtue. "Is it virtue," asks Casanova, "which has undertaken the regeneration of France or is it crime which has determined to overthrow the State under pretext of liberating it from tyranny?"[14]

In a somewhat different mode, but also questioning the place of crime in the Revolution, Sade asks how the Republic, realm of law, can overcome the corruption of the regime that preceded it and the violence of its own birth. What's more, how can one distinguish between two types of violence: one criminal, the other restoring the reign of Virtue. Sade suggests the possibility that they are indistinguishable. Thus, the republican State can maintain itself only at the cost of ever-escalating criminal activity and perpetual insurrection: a disastrous prospect for the legislator but delightful for the libertine philosopher.

For Casanova, more libertine than philosopher, and for whom intellectual excitement offers no distraction from his immediate interests, the future of the Revolution, whether it tends towards escalating violence or ends in happy equilibrium, offers no pleasure. In the first instance, because he dislikes institutionalized anarchy and in the second, because he is too old to be able to partake in this era of harmony. In Casanova's counter-revolutionary resolution, there exists one simple yet decisive element: *the lifetime of a human being*. Applied to himself, this criteria makes it highly improbable that he would know a future able to justify all the sacrifices of the present. This concern with mortality separates the aging Casanova from the sacrificial lyricism of a revolutionary youth impatient to prove that it counts life for nothing. Casanova cherishes life as much as his principles. Not so much through rigorousness, but more as a kind of extension of self-love: "I am too old to give up mine [my principles] if by chance they turned out to be wrong. Besides, I like them." On Casanova's part, there is no enthusiasm, affective or philosophical, only bouts of impotent rage.

Casanova's hatred of the 'people' is vehement and agitated. It does not issue from the tranquil morgue of the aristocracy. It does not rest upon the secret sentiment of superiority which prompted Voltaire to refer to Damiens as a "lunatic from the dregs of the people." It is combative. The people – their misery, the harshness of their work – torment him with the thought that their lot could just as well be his. Casanova is not separated from the people by either birthright or a humanist superego. And when the Revolution topples the existing hierarchies and the people take power, Casanova becomes even more

furious (already possessed of a choleric disposition): at the direct threat to himself that this upset entails and at what he perceives to be a new dupery. "*Le peuple-roi*" (the sovereign people) in his eyes are but victims of new masters: the orators, the journalists who manipulate them.

> *A Revolution was necessary*. These are the words of the representatives in power today in France, pretending to be faithful ministers of the people who are the masters of the Republic. Poor people! Stupid people who die of hunger and misery, or else are slaughtered by the rest of Europe only to make rich those who have misled them.[15]

Casanova has a particular intolerance for the idea of necessity, which he recognizes as valid only for the physical world; for all else, for the unstable edifices of desire and action, he believes whole-heartedly in chance.

Casanova loves solitary adventure. Problems posed in terms of social class do not interest him. He is not attracted by those political adventures, initiated by the Revolution, which inspire a field of action where the lines of battle are drawn along partisan influences and personal ambitions. Contrary to a Cagliostro, Casanova is neither partisan nor idealist. He has, at most, accomplices, whom he discards as soon as the trick is turned.

The Letter to Léonard Snetlage: A Final Self-portrait

In a curious text entitled *To Léonard Snetlage: Doctor of Law of the University Goettingen* and composed by "Jacques Casanova: Doctor of Law of the University of Padoua," Casanova attacks what he believes to be the most effective instrument of revolutionary deceit: language.[16] Public frenzy is driven by orations and by leaflets. For Casanova, "journalists write only to vent their hatred."[17] As for orators, who exhaust themselves preaching to the converted, their facility with language does not seduce him. If he sees himself as a fine talker, he has rarely used his abilities to deal in truths, more as theatrically contrived gratuitous performances.

His "colleague" Dr. Snetlage's book was a *New French Dictionary containing the newly created expressions of the French People. Supplemental to the French Academy's Dictionary or to any other book of Vocabulary*. Because Casanova loved words and often deplored the conservatism of the French language, he was very interested in the Revolution as a linguistic event. Moreover, being a foreigner, Casanova related to French as first and foremost a language of the dictionary. Thus, this "new dictionary" was sure to capture his attention. Moreover, as a literary genre, the dictionary appeals to Casanova (let us not forget that one of his long term projects was to write a "dictionary of cheeses").

The basic criticism that Casanova has of Snetlage's dictionary concerns the veritable authors of the Revolution's words: "The new words," he writes, "were not created by the French Nation, nor by its people, but by orators and certain inept journalists."[18] Concretely, he objects to the words presented by Snetlage either for their lack of euphony or signification. But there are some he is willing to adopt. The *Letter to Snetlage* is not simply a condemnation. Between *abri* (refuge), which he dislikes and which he considers an aberration (knowing Casanova's wayward life one is not surprised by this antipathy), and *télégraphe* (telegraph), which "as a new word corresponds well to an all new subject" and therefore satisfies him, Casanova offers the reader a variable text, one which is at times fussy and a tad boring, and at others digressive and amusing. This is something he justifies early on: "That which we call the philosophy of languages, my dear colleague, can consist only in these minute details." In any case, are not the words he comments upon as telling as any self-portrait?

For its value then as a self-portrait, and since the *Letter to Léonard Snetlage* is impossible to find in bookstores, the following are some excerpts from this work. (Casanova's text comments on some sixty-three words.)

After *Abriter* (to shelter) Casanova objects to:

Abstractivement [abstractedly]. What purpose, I ask you, does this adverb serve, which means no more than *abstraitement* [abstractly] and is not more convenient. I could not find *concrétivement* which is no less deserving.

Alarmiste [alarmist]. I hope that you won't think ill of me, dear colleague, if I skip as many words as I please, although this should not be taken as approval. In the meantime, *alarmiste* seems to me a foolish word which does not appear to be made to be taken seriously.

Anarchiste [anarchist]. Nothing new here except the form which would seem to indicate a professor or an anarchistic agitator and anarchy become trade. This was a necessary institution, metaphysically sanctioned by the Legislative Assembly, to which France owes its happiness and without which France would never have had the glory of becoming a republic.

Apitoyer [to move to pity]. Pitiful word.

Déhonté [to be without shame]. *Dévergondé* [shameless] and *impudent* [impudent] were better I think.

Egalité [equality]. You talk of what you know. But I am sure that this constitutional equality, instituted as the new government's platform, is and will remain an enigma to all of the regenerated nation, and that the people, always gay despite the misery that oppresses them, must joke about it all the time. They must be very curious about the significance of this word, seeing before their eyes at every moment nothing but inequalities.

Embrigadé, embrigadement [to indoctrinate, indoctrination]. Words that make you laugh. You and I, Latin, Italian and Spanish dictionaries in hand, could have sired a thousand words worthy of being incorporated into the beautiful French language, in the place of all these baroque expressions which I believe merit your scorn rather than your commentary. The Grand Council would have rewarded our efforts and sent us a diploma of fraternization.

Electriser [to electrify]. I would like to find fault with this word used metaphorically, but I prefer to say nothing since I find it less disagreeable than *enthousiasmer* [to fill with enthusiasm] which is, however, French and has been for a very long time.[19]

Incarcérer [to incarcerate]. One used to say *emprisonner* [to imprison] which has apparently become old hat. But do we become richer or poorer when we contrive words in this way? This question has a bearing on the word *incarcérer*; unless we francisize *carcere* [jail] to replace *prison*, we will never find its roots in French. *Carcère* however, would be good with an "e" grave on the second syllable and, upon, seeing that it rhymes with *Galère* [galley], the Committee for Public Instruction would find it quite useful and could decide later on if it should have a masculine or feminine article.

Incriminer [to incriminate]. This word brings to mind the pleasant idea of inoculating crime. It wouldn't be hard to take physically or morally but the inoculator would deserve to be cursed. It would be better to think of an inoculation made especially to exonerate [*innocenter*] poor humankind which has become altogether too guilty.

Louanger [to glorify]. This is a very expressive word which has been French for a very long time, and which I like because it sounds *spernatif* [scornful]. Its only fault is that it is ignoble, but at this happy epoch when we have abolished vain nobility, this fault should not impede it.

Motion [motion]. It is a good catch like *Club, Comité, Pamphlétaire*, and many others. The English, always generous, will never ask for restitution from their courageous neighbours and they'll even give them the empire of the sea, if they can manage to retake it.

Comité [committee]. . . . you have made the word *Comité* a derivative of *commission*!

The French also took this word, along with many others from the modern Carthaginians who, not being Africans, tell you through me that the root of this word is from somewhere else. This is what I learned at Dr. Maty's of the British Museum, the year 1763, from the learned Johnson, author of the Lexicon, criticized for its vast erudition. *Ne quid nimis.*

The word committee, he told me, does not derive from the verb to commit, even in the sense where applied to mortal or venial sins and any other sort of faults. Some think it comes from the latin word *comitia* that the Romans held in the Forum, about which Aulu-Gelle speaks so knowingly; but I am not convinced. Others might say it comes from the

word *comis* which in Latin means *gentle*, from whence comes *comitas* which means *affability, politeness, urbanity*; this derivation is implausible since our Committees are hardly gentle nor extremely polite. If you will therefore permit me to tell you what I think, then I would say that this word comes from the *mal caduc* [the disease of lapses], that which the French call the disease of Saint-Jean, and Hippocrates calls epilepsy. The Romans, who never bothered to speak Greek, called it *morbus comitialis*; and it is from there, as I see it, that our word *comité* has its origin.... Those who disputed, quibbled and harassed to the point that their jaws seized-up and they would drop, as if dead, to the ground, were referred to by those same Romans as *homines comitiales*....[20]

Comité du Salut public [Committee for Public Safety]. Its name could have been the Aegis. The horrible Gorgon, sculpted on black marble in bas-relief, over the door to the chamber would highlight this lovely motto: *Salus populi suprema lex esto.*

Comité du Commerce [Committee for Commerce]. We could have called it Mercury and placed that god's statue, with wings at his feet and at his head and a purse in his hands, on its door.

Présumable, prétentieux [presumable, pretentious]. They are unbearable and I doubt they'll attract any bees.

But Casanova does more than simply refuse the words of the New France. There are also, a very small number of words which he deems acceptable; those which, despite the political upheavals continue to describe his universe. For example, Casanova loved *Franciades* because the word evokes a delicious recipe. ("Imagine, dear colleague, my surprise when I learned through the local papers that they had given the new Olympiads the name of this dainty entrée. I sighed and my mouth watered.") In the same spirit of misunderstanding, one can think that *La Marseillaise* reminds him of the card game of the same name which he mentions, among many others, in his memoirs.

He also receives favourably, without double-entendre, the following:

Phraser [to phrase]. It is a word I don't dislike. In Italy we have *fraseggiare* [to phrase] and *e fraseggiatore* [a phrase-maker] hence you could also suggest *phraseur*.

Urgence [emergency]. This is new. It is the abstract form of urgent which is not new and comes from the Latin *Urget praesentia Turni*. I would have wished that more words of this type had been made because it is true that the French language is missing abstract forms. It is too bad that this word rhymes with *ambulance*.

Versatilité [versatility]. This is also an excellent abstract form.

And, as if by chance, Casanova "strongly approves, for example, of *immoral* and *immoralité* [immorality]... words of this kind are all French, although you can find them

in no dictionary, and no classic has ever used them. The good sense and the genius of the French language adopted them even before their birth."[21]

The liberty at work in Casanova's memoirs is not that defined by revolutionary laws. And if, according to Saint-Just: "Servitude depends on unjust laws; liberty on reasonable laws; and licentiousness on one's self," then, Casanova is purely licentious. Not only in the anarchistic sense denounced by Saint-Just, but also in terms of a more strictly sensuous definition. Freedom, according to Casanova, is entirely contained in the grace of a moment. It is lived according to the unforseeable rhythms of a libertine voyage.

Translated by Nicole Santilli

Notes

This text has been translated with permission of the author from the French original. It combines excerpts from the "Introduction" and Chapter 4 "Casanova et la révolution," of Chantal Thomas's book: *Casanova, Un voyage libertin* (Paris: Editions Denoël, 1985). – Trans.

1. As a reference text I use Casanova's original manuscript published in 6 tomes and 12 volumes, under the title of *Histoire de ma vie*, (Wiesbaden: F.A. Brockhaus, 1960). [Casanova's *Histoire de ma vie* was first published in 1826-38 under the title *Mémoires de J. Casanova de Seingalt.* – Trans.]

2. Casanova, *Histoire de ma vie*, I, 207.

3. Guillaume Apollinaire, *Casanova* (Paris: Gallimard, 1952). Apollinaire recreates the episode with the false-castrato Bellino-Thérèse.

4. Casanova, *Histoire de ma vie*, X, 52.

5. Robert Darnton, *Mesmerism and the End of Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 41-42.

6. Casanova, *Histoire de ma Vie*, IX, 305.

7. Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York: Harper & Row, 1984), 4.

8. Casanova, *Histoire de ma Vie*, V, 10.

9. Casanova, *A Léonard Snetlage* (Paris: Librarie A. Thomas, 1903), 43.

10. Casanova, *Histoire de ma Vie*, V, 15.

11. Ibid., 55.

12. *L'Attentat de Damiens, Discours sur l'événement au XVIIIe siècle*, ed. Pierre Retat (Lyon: Ed. du C.N.R.S., 1979). With regard to Casanova and the Damiens Affair, cf. Chap. 12 (Jean-Claude Bonnet).

13. Casanova, *Histoire de ma Vie*, V, 55.

14. Casanova, *A Léonard Snetlage*, 89.

15. Casanova, *Histoire de ma Vie*, V, 96.

16. Félicien Marceau points out: "Strange coincidence: this Snetlage misses being the anagram of Seingalt by only two letters..." in *Une insolente liberté, les Aventures de Casanova* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983), 336.

17. Casanova, *A Léonard Snetlage*, 97.

18. Casanova, *A Léonard Snetlage*, 14.

19. At this point in time, "*électriser*" is not heard without allusion to the Viennese doctor, Mesmer.

20. It would seem Casanova has difficulty submitting to alphabetical order.

21. Casanova, *A Léonard Snetlage*, 20.